# ESL with Children's Literature: The Way Whole Language Worked in One Kindergarten Class

*By Irma K. Ghosn*

A few years ago, during a series of workshops for primary school English teachers, I came to realize that appropriate materials were not readily available in spite of the fact that English was introduced in early grades-often as early as kindergarten. Most of the textbooks on the market fell into two categories: texts intended for children learning English in the United States, and texts for children learning English as a foreign language in areas where English is not the language of the community. The texts, written for ESL learners, were not suitable for the average Lebanese kindergartners. First, the content of the lessons assumed that students possess a certain level of cultural awareness. Second, the texts were not intended for four-year-olds but were geared more for the cognitive level of six to seven year olds. Third, the cost of these texts was often too high, especially for the less affluent rural schools. The EFL texts intended for developing countries, on the other hand, although less costly, were limited in content and were structured around vocabulary and grammar exercises-even when the aim was to address communicative aspects of language. Furthermore, the content of these texts was also inappropriate for very young children. These fragmented exercises, so typical of many EFL texts, clearly did not prepare the children to *learn* in English. Yet many of these children were going to study science, mathematics, and perhaps other subjects as well in English. So something else was needed. (At the time of this writing, the situation has much improved as several "Big Book" series are available. However, the cost is still a problem for many schools.)

Since I had used a whole language approach, had taught literature with some success in teaching EFL students in university classes, and had read about many successful literature- based, whole language reading programs in L1 (Arabic) contexts, I began to look at available children's literature as a possible tool to teach EFL to young learners. This idea was tested by a cooperative kindergarten teacher in a private rural school in Lebanon.

## Learning a Whole Language

Extensive L1 research tells us that children learn and create language not by sitting at their desks doing pencil and paper tasks in isolation from their peers, or drilling structures out of context, but by interacting with and manipulating language and by engaging in meaningful use of language in a community of language learners. Halliday (1975) and Vygotsky (1978), among others, have stressed the social quality of language development. Attempts to fragment language into parts-grammatical patterns, vocabulary lists, or phonics-result in "abstractions and nonsense" (Goodman et al., 1987), and destroys it (Rigg 1991). As a matter of fact, some educators claim that the traditional reading skill time is difficult, and actually even painful for many children

(Holdaway 1991). If fragmented skill lessons, workbooks, and endless worksheets are not the best way for L1 learners to develop their language and master the art of reading and writing, they must be much less appropriate for young foreign language learners who need to learn a whole new language. These students need to learn to listen, to speak, to read, and to write in a new language, often without exposure to English outside school. Because language is an interactive process, children learning a language need ample opportunity to interact in a meaningful, interesting context and play with the language while developing vocabulary and structures. They need the collaboration of their peers and teachers in creating meaningful contexts and negotiating meanings in those contexts. Constructivist theory suggests that they must "build knowledge from the inside in interaction with the environment" (Kamii 1991). From this discussion one can conclude that students cannot successfully acquire a new language through decontextualized drills and skill exercises. Yet that is still the way many primary grade EFL classes are set up.

As language teachers have come to accept whole language, materials and textbooks advocating whole language have begun to appear on the market. However, textbooks that claim to cater to whole language actually contradict the whole philosophy, which advocates language functions that are purposeful, functional, and real to the learners, within a context of a curriculum that is flexible and evolves around the needs and interests of the children.

## Benefits of Children's Literature

Gianelli (1991:13) describes a successful thematically-based bilingual program and suggests that thematic instruction works "because theme-related language and vocabulary are used and reused in new contexts, all of which are meaningfully related." The children's own, immediate environment- themselves, family, neighborhood and school-are, of course, good sources of theme units, but in addition to these, nursery rhymes and children's literature offer a natural and interesting medium for language acquisition. They contain predictable, repetitive patterns that reinforce vocabulary and structures, provide relevant themes for young learners, and they are often highly *generative* . Quality literature presents a multitude of discussion topics- from the literal to those that transcend the story and allow children to link the story to their own lives, at times making sophisticated generalizations, as McConaghy (1990), has pointed out.

Just as children acquiring their first language begin developing it orally, young children learning a second language need to develop their oral language to some extent before they can be expected to function in writing. However, in many classes that I had observed, young children were copying words and phrases they did not understand and then in chorus were "reading" them to the teacher. Carefully chosen children's literature allows children to develop their receptive language in an entertaining, meaningful context and naturally invites them to repeat many of the predictable words and phrases, which they gradually take ownership of and add to their receptive and productive language. All the activities of the following experiment heavily emphasize development of oral language. Language and the knowledge that children construct through the use of language are very important to individual children, although they use different means and strategies when engaging in learning. Thus, it is important that the activities provided accommodate the diverse needs of young learners. Open-ended activities that allow for children's interest and input are essential. Newman (1985) aptly describes, not assignments, but

"invitations" to learning. The teaching still has objectives and goals, but the means through which the objectives are reached must be flexible, as should be, to some extent, the objectives themselves.

The following activities are just samples. This is the way it worked in one kindergarten class one semester. In other classrooms, the outcome is likely to be different, depending on the students and the teacher. The sample activities are not intended as blueprints to be slavishly imitated, which would be against the whole language philosophy, but as a guide for the teacher to allow the children's individual and collective interests and abilities to mold the lessons. All the activities can be done using one copy of the chosen story, as children will be making their own books to read independently later on. This saves a considerable amount of money in situations where the budget is very tight and parent resources are limited.

## The Lebanese KG Experience with Whole Language

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* , by Eric Carle was selected as an ideal "language story" because it had the potential of being highly generative and allowed several themes and concepts to be generated by the children (and the teacher). The story also contained much repetitious language, the days of the week, and the numbers one through five that were part of the requirements for the class. The story is about a hungry little caterpillar which eats through a variety of edibles over a week, gets a stomachache, and, after spending time in a self-built cocoon, emerges as a colorful butterfly.

The class of 26 four-year olds was taught by Betty Saade, a Lebanese-Canadian teacher in a private rural school in Lebanon. Before Betty introduced the story to the class, we had identified potential concepts and vocabulary for the story that met, or exceeded, the requirements for the program set for the class. (See Table 1 below) After discussing the whole language philosophy and how I thought it might work for the children she taught, we made a plan of possible activities. Betty then introduced the story to the children by asking if they would like to hear a story she had just received (instead of the usual "today we are going to learn about." she had been accustomed to doing). As predicted, the children reacted to the idea with enthusiasm, and she proceeded to read the story. However, at the conclusion of the story, she did not begin to ask the usual questions about the events and details of the story. Instead she sat and waited for a few seconds. She did not need to wait for more than that when children began commenting on the story. All through the discussion, Betty followed the leads the children and decided to follow the most prominent interest: food. Most of the children's discourse was in L1 since the children, with few exceptions, had had less than four months of exposure to English. When the children engaged in L1, Betty used reflective listening and "echoed" back comments in English, often extending a question to other children:

*Rania:* Ana ma bhib elkabees (I don't like pickles.)

*Teacher (nodding to Rania):* "You don't like pickles?"

*(To class):* "Does Rania like pickles?" (pointing to the pickle in the book.)

*Class:* "No!"

*Teacher:* "That's right. She doesn't like pickles. Pickles are sour (makes a face to indicate sour taste). Who likes pickles?"

*Three children:* "Ana, Ana!" (Me, me)

*Teacher:* "Ah. You like pickles. Hani, Tanya, and Zeina like pickles. I like strawberries (pointing to strawberries in the book); they are sweet. Mmmm! Who likes strawberries?"

*Several children:* "Me!" "[Ana!]" (Me)

*Teacher:* "It seems that we all like strawberries. They are sweet. Are strawberries sweet?"

*Class:* "Yes!"

This provided necessary modeling and repetition without the out-of-context drill flavor. Children were enjoying themselves and were actively participating in a meaningful use of new language. With young children, it seems to be an advantage if the teacher is familiar with the children's native language, even if she uses only L2 herself. Betty's knowledge of Arabic enabled her to repeat children's comments in English and reduce the frustration and loss of motivation that may result from the lack of communication between the teacher and the children. This is especially significant with young children whose communicative skills even in L1 are still developing and who are already facing the stress of being separated from the familiar home environment and their caregiver. When classroom discourse is structured so that the teacher frequently solicits hypothesis formulation-something that books with their predictable format are excellent for-and asks questions, children's thinking is stimulated while teacher's frequent modeling of structures and vocabulary builds their receptive language.

After the story session, children were given the customary "free time." They could choose the writing/drawing table supplied with paper and crayons, the house-keeping corner, or the block and toy center. After the first reading of the story, some children headed for the writing table. The story reading continued during the week. Betty read the story several times, at times using the pointer to follow the text as she read. Some children began to repeat the key words, and soon the class was reading in chorus. Some children began to seek the book out during their free time, taking turns to "read" it to each other. After six days, the demand for the book became so great that it was natural to suggest that each student should have his/her personal copy. By the time the books were ready, most children were able to "read" their story and take it home. One copy was made for the class library. Figure 1 below describes three sample days from the experiment, the first and the second day, and a day approximately one week into the unit.

Other activities that were introduced included picture-sorting, number or picture bingo, dramatizations with a sock puppet, painting butterflies, and making papier- mYch, cocoons. A

grocery store corner was set up that incorporated concepts related to the story, mainly fruit and other foods. In this class, children incorporated much vocabulary and many concepts from the story into their daily free time activities from day one, with the number and frequency of words increasing as the days went by.

## Caveat

For the whole language approach to work in an EFL context where the children get very little or no exposure to English outside the class, the teacher must have near-native fluency in the target language and should be familiar with the children's L1. Without L1 knowledge, the teacher will not be able to use reflective listening, and thus communication will be limited.

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# Figure 1

## Day 1

Story: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle

Children arrive

**Calendar activity and "morning conversation" Story time**

The teacher reads *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. After reading the story, the teacher follows the children's lead and the discussion focuses on their favorite foods. Much of the discourse is in Arabic, the children's $L_1$, with the teacher repeating comments in $L_2$, elaborating and extending questions to different children.

Free time

Several children settle down with paper and colored pencils to draw "things they like" as invited by the teacher. Several food items appear in the drawings, demonstrating the influence of the story.

Physical activity indoors (due to rain)

The teacher asks the children how they think caterpillars move, and the children eagerly demonstrate.

Washroom visit before snack time

The teacher has the children line up and go through the doorway (If resources permit, the preposition could be demonstrated by hanging a large paper fruit across the doorway for the children to go through, just as the caterpillar went through the fruit).

Snack time

The children spontaneously refer to the story as they identify some of the caterpillar's food in each other's lunch boxes and munch through their food. Animated discussions ensue in $L_1$ with a sprinkling of $L_2$. The teacher circulates among the children, making comments in English and asking the children questions.

Whole class activity

The teacher introduces picture bingo to the class. Pictures are drawn from the story and the teacher goes through and identifies each picture. Many of the children repeat the words after her.

Free time

The children have a choice of puzzles, picture books, and art table. A brief break follows, after which the $L_1$ teacher takes over the class.

## Day 2

Children arrive

Calendar activity

The day is Tuesday, and the children want to remember what the caterpillar had eaten on Tuesday. There is some disagreement, and the teacher suggests they check it in the story. The story is brought out and the children request a reading of the whole story after checking Tuesday's food (This went as we had planned).

The *story* is read again

The teacher directs the children's attention to the numbers in the story, and a math lesson naturally follows. The children are all familiar with numbers one and two and now focus on the number three. The children are eager to demonstrate their knowledge of numbers and much counting goes on.

Free time

Again the children have the choice of activity. The influence of the story is clearly increasing as children playing with blocks count them and organize them into groups. At the writing table, numbers appear next to drawings of fruit and other food items. Before snack time, the teacher introduces, "The Caterpillar Chant," written for this project and the children eagerly join in (See Table 2).

Snack time

The children continue to be interested in food items and try to find who has "caterpillar food' in their lunch box. Some counting of cookies and candy bars also goes on. Some children chew holes into their flat Arabic bread, saying they are caterpillars.

Outdoor activity

Several children "pop" around as caterpillars which have emerged from their eggs and float around butterfly fashion: "Look, look, butterfly!"

## A week into the unit

During the calendar activity, the children still refer to the caterpillar's diet. The children are now joining the teacher in choral reading of the story, and some children express interest in reading the story to the class. Two little girls have prepared themselves and take turns "reading." They have memorized several lines of the story. Their presentation is highly enjoyable to the class, and many children chant parts of the story with them. The teacher suggests that perhaps the class could retell the story so she could write it on the flip chart for everyone to see the words. As children begin to retell the story, there is much discussion before they agree on the correct lines.

The teacher has brought in three silkworms from a local grower, and children help her set up a corner where the silkworm box can be kept safely. Children examine the mulberry tree leaves, the food that the silkmoth caterpillars eat. The color and texture of the leaves are discussed, but the children's main interest is the caterpillars. They

note that these are not the same color as the caterpillar in the story. The children spend much of their free time observing the caterpillars.
The teacher observes that several children seem to have internalized the number concepts of "three," "four," and "five" and can rapidly identify the number of items in a group without actually having to count.
The children play alphabet bingo using vocabulary from the story. They also recite "The Caterpillar chant."

**Caterpillar Chant**

*Sing to the tune of Frere Jacques, or chant as a Jazz chant*

Caterpillar, caterpillar,
How are you? How are you?
Inside your cocoon, inside your cocoon
What do you do? What do you do?

## Table 1

Concepts and target vocabulary identified for
*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*

| | |
|---|---|
| butterfly life cycle | days of the week |
| on; through; out of; inside | hungry |
| food groups | eat; ate |
| numbers 1- 5 | caterpillar |
| stomachache | cocoon |
| apple; plum; orange; strawberry | tiny; big; fat |

Note: In the experimental class the vocabulary grew to include particular children's favorite foods: hamburger, fries, bananas, honey. In another class, with another group of children, the vocabulary will reflect the particular children's interests.